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ABSTRACT

Four components have made particular teachers what they are. First, they have found that students respond best when given positive encouragement. Recent research suggests that an invitational school, where encouragement is the norm, is far more productive than a school that does not invite students to learn. The second component is the teacher's ability to accept students' differing points of view. If there are many possible interpretations of a given literacy work, teachers have no right to impose their interpretations on students as the only acceptable one. A third component is the belief that education is active. Students should not be viewed as parrots who memorize and repeat what the instructor says. Rather, education should be considered an intellectual endeavor that requires active participation. The final component is the teacher's continual rethinking of his or her classes. By staying actively involved the teacher encourages students to do the same. Educating critical thinkers is essential in maintaining a free and open society. At the same time, the teaching of critical thinking can be enjoyable for teachers, and can allow them to watch the minds of students become unleashed. (SG)

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Creating Critical Thinkers, Not Parrots:

One Teacher's Hope

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Creating Critical Thinkers, Not Parrots:
One Teacher's Hope

What is the essence of an effective teacher? I have asked myself that question many times, and I continue to ask that question of myself, especially at the start of each school year. I ask the question because I want to be an effective teacher, one who makes a difference in the lives of my students--trite as that may sound. But effective teaching happens only if I am willing to constantly monitor and evaluate my performance in the classroom in terms of what I know to be effective teaching. As I have done this over the years, I have concluded that the art of effective teaching in my discipline, English, and perhaps in all disciplines, should be primarily focused on creating critical thinkers, not parrots. I strive to be a teacher who invites students to be critical thinkers, to shed their parrot's feathers and think for themselves. I believe this should be the highest goal of education, whether it be in kindergarten or graduate school.

Let me take a moment to explain my parrot metaphor, using as an illustration a student I had in one of the first classes I ever taught. This student was a workaholic. The amount of time he had to put in on an academic task did not matter so long as he received an A. The grade was of paramount importance. And because he equated education with memory work, he had learned the fine art of rote

memorization with exquisite precision. He took notes assiduously in class, and on any objective quiz or test could parrot back any concrete information I had presented. He was, in many respects, the perfect school parrot. But when I asked him to take the concepts we were dealing with, in this case, basic literary criticism, and apply those concepts to a piece of literature we had not discussed in class, the student was at a total loss. He even got angry that I would expect him to comment on literature that had not been thoroughly explained to him. Parrots do not think, and I would argue that any education fostering the growth of parrots is bad education, and counterproductive to our society and way of life. Producing parrots is not what I am about in my classes.

As I have examined my teaching strategies and techniques, I find four major components that make me the teacher I am. (Of course I did not start out teaching as I do now. My pedagogy has developed across a number of years, based on reading, the influence of effective teachers I have known, and practical experience.) The four basic components of my teaching--I would say the very essence of what I do--revolve around 1) encouraging students, 2) accepting student views that differ from mine, 3) striving to encourage critical thinkers, and 4) continually rethinking and revising my syllabi.

First, as I have developed as a teacher, I have noticed that students respond best when I give them positive encouragement. (Kid watching, a term coined by the reading researcher and theorist, Yetta Goodman, is important for anyone who wants to be an effective teacher. I have noticed that the majority of effective teachers constantly read their students, their intellectual development, their areas of interest, and especially their changing emotional dispositions. Weak teachers are oblivious to every facet of their students, except, perhaps, whether the student is ingesting certain academic material.) I would submit that effective teaching involves the old cliche about honey attracting more flies than vinegar. There is even a growing pedagogical movement supporting the idea that an invitational school, where encouragement is the norm, is far more productive than a school that does not invite students to learn (Purkey and Novak, 1984). I am using invite here in the broadest sense, from the physical plant right down to the way subject matter is presented. At the heart of invitational education is the teacher, the person who establishes the tenor of the classroom, be it in elementary school or the college classroom. I do my best to invite students to give learning a try, and real learning, as opposed to rote memorization, involves thinking.

My best learning experiences as a student occurred when the teacher established a positive rapport with the class,

created an environment that invited me to participate and learn. Dr. Sanford Schwartz, my Shakespeare professor, was just such a person. He let us know quickly that he cared deeply about his subject matter, that he wanted us to do well in the class, and that he would work hard right along with us. He also let us know that work of high quality--including critical appraisal of texts--was expected. But Dr. Schwartz never lost sight of us as students, never got so caught up in his own academic interests that we got left behind, was never My Uncle Tobey riding his hobby horse off into obscurity. Dr. Schwartz invited us to learn by thinking critically, and most of us not only learned much about Shakespeare, we also came to love the Bard's works, no small accomplishment for a teacher.

I have tried to be a teacher like Professor Schwartz, encouraging students to think, to look at literary texts with open minds. This is not always an easy task. Many students have an aversion for English, an aversion cultivated over many years. But I have seen how the supportive atmosphere in a classroom can help students overcome many fears and trepidations. If a classroom is open, supportive, and inviting, even the most reticent students will eventually shed their parrot feathers.

What does a supportive, invitational classroom produce in practical terms? In a recent class we were analyzing a number of Wordsworth's sonnets. We had discussed "The World

Is Too Much With Us" at some length, and the class had developed a concensus about its meaning. We were about to move on when one student, Bob, asked to present a different interpretation than the one we had generated. Bob is not an English major. Yet he felt comfortable enough to present some quite novel ideas to 30 of his peers. His interpretation was remarkable for its insight, good enough for the class to agree that his interpretation was certainly a valid possibility. I was pleased that a student was thinking critically and looking closely at the text to support his assertions. Those are the kind of readers I want to encourage. Those are the kind of readers our educational system should be encouraging and producing. Those are the kind of readers our country needs.

The second component of my teaching style follows logically from the above illustration and concerns how the ability of a teacher to accept differing points of view has a major impact on students. As I came through school, I noticed that most teachers always had the "right" answer, especially in English when it came to interpreting a piece of literature. A former student who was a bright, insightful reader, told me that when she responded to literature, her English teachers all through school always said she was wrong. She illustrates my point. The only way for a student to do well in class discussion was to guess what the teacher was thinking--to read the teacher, not the

text. (Students learn this lesson well, and they learn it early.) And it was always a given that students must parrot the teacher's answers back on tests.

But how silly of teachers to take this position. There are multiple ways to analyze any given text as Bleich (1975) and Rosenblatt (1938, 1969, 1978) have so persuasively argued. One has only to observe the mountains of critical material written about major literary works--and many minor ones too--to see that any text may be viewed in a variety of ways. One of my more perceptive students pointed out to a class that he had found 26 different interpretations of Poe's "Cask of Amontillado." What right do I, as a teacher, have to impose my interpretation of a text on students as the only acceptable interpretation? Therefore, in my classes, any interpretation that can be supported by the text is given equal time. In this way I encourage the critical thinkers in my class, not the parrots.

Of course, this can be frustrating for students who have been trained to be parrots. In one recent class, the discussion waxed heavy, and there were a number of differing views being vociferously supported. The students were continually going to the text to support their assertions, but every time one student made a claim, another student would come up with a counter interpretation. At one point, a student turned to me in utter frustration and loudly demanded "the right answer." I love classes like this,

where closure is not neat and simple, even as life is not neat and simple. Often there are no right answers, but parrots do not like such a state.

Being able to accept multiple interpretations of a text does not absolve me from knowing a variety of critical interpretations--from knowing my material. But it does require me to be more critical in how I throw around interpretations by professional critics. Dr. Schwartz was again my mentor in this view of teaching. He was widely read in Elizabethan literature, especially Shakespeare, and never stopped reading during his teaching career. But he told me once that he had stopped bringing copious notes to class and lecturing from those notes because he wanted his students to think--to create, as it were, their own notes. And such a pedagogy has far reaching implications. If a student learns to think critically, that student will be able to read any play--or, for that matter, any text--and that is what Dr. Schwartz sought, just as I do today. Rote memorization is not education. Learning to think is.

As the above implies quite clearly, the third component of my teaching style is the belief that education is active. I do not see students as vessels to be filled with the knowledge that I have acquired. I am not like a colleague who said his only responsibility as a teacher was to present his material, and it was the students' responsibility to learn (memorize?) what he presented. He also stated that he

did not care if they learned or not, that such a concern was not a part of his job. My colleague wanted parrots. I want thinkers, questioners.

I see education as active--an intellectual endeavor that requires active participation. So I push my students to learn to think in the context of a variety of texts. Part of the challenge with such a pedagogy is to get students to respond, especially when so many students have been trained as parrots for so long. Therefore, in all my literature classes, students are required to respond in writing to the assigned reading before the class meets. It is difficult to write about material without some active cognitive involvement, and I have found that when students write before class, they begin moving away from a passive view of education. They also learn quickly that it is not only okay, but laudable when they hop off their parrot perches and take some chances, do some thinking.

The final component of my teaching style is that I am continually rethinking my classes, no matter how often I teach them. I do not think my course syllabi are ever exactly the same from one semester to another. It is important, I think, to stay actively involved in the educational process, especially if I am seeking to encourage students to become actively involved with their education. I know a colleague who totes out the same notes he's been using for 20 years. The students know it too. And the

class is a disaster. For there is nothing very dynamic happening in that class. In fact, the instructor encourages the students to hop on their perches and be perfect parrots. This is just what we do not need teachers doing.

Perhaps it is appropriate to end with a few thoughts on why I have become the teacher I am, with why I continue to refine the basic pedagogical stance I have outlined above. First, I have come to believe that educating critical thinkers is essential if our country is going to survive as a free and open society. Parrots end up in cages. We need critical thinkers who will carry on the necessary reforms that have recently begun in our society--reforms in race relations, the environment, and politics. Parrots do not think about reforms or about freedom. I do not want to see our society end up a flock of caged birds.

Second, I approach teaching the way I do because it is enjoyable. I never know what will happen in a class. I never know what sorts of questions will be posed. I never know what sorts of insights students will have. I never know what new bit of illumination I will experience in a class. And I like that. After a class is over, I know that I will be a slightly different person for having been in that class. I hope my students will be slightly different too.

Finally, I love seeing minds unleashed--working, thinking, creating. As I said earlier, I believe there is

no higher goal in education--and such is the goal I strive for as I teach. I do not want parrots on their perches. I want individuals thinking critically.

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